
5) Stakeholder Perceptions

Introduction

During September and October 2004 KPMG undertook stakeholder interviews on behalf of the Learning Skills Council Greater Manchester in the Rochdale area of Greater Manchester. A full list of stakeholders interviewed can be found in Annex 2. Stakeholders interviewed included College Principals, Councillors, Elected Members, Head teachers of Secondary Schools, Employers, the Connexions Service and Information, Advice and Guidance Services, and JobCentre Plus.

Stakeholders were asked to comment on a range of issues affecting the learning and skills sector in Rochdale, including developments in the 14-19 agenda, the Widening Participation Agenda and any future developments that may require a reorganisation of provision in the area.

This section of the overall report looks at the key themes which emerged from the stakeholder interviews.

This stakeholder section documents the views of the stakeholders interviewed; it does not represent the views of KPMG or the views of the Learning and Skills Council. However, we record perceptions here as important contributions to our overall understanding of the issues facing LSC Greater Manchester in its Strategic Area Review.

Structure

It was generally felt that the current provision in Rochdale with the college, four schools with six forms, and a number of work place training providers presents a structure which offers a degree of choice, however concern was expressed about the number of students who left the borough at 16 in order to study in neighbouring towns such as Oldham. It was felt that this could indicate that either the structure of post 16 provision in Rochdale needed attention, or that the curriculum offer lacked appropriate choice contributing to learners studying elsewhere. It was felt that this was particularly the case with the loss of students to Oldham where a structure which encompasses a vocationally based general further education college and a sixth form college was felt to work particularly well and which was clearly a significant competitor to the educational provision in Rochdale. One interviewee felt that this type of structure could have been replicated in Rochdale some time ago, and as a consequence of this missed opportunity the borough may be suffering in terms of progression and retention. It was stated that this year there has been a significant increase in the number of students progressing post 16 into some form of learning which is an encouraging trend.

It was felt that there is currently some excellent work in schools in the Rochdale area on which the borough needs to capitalise through a unified 14-19 provision, and further consideration of the structure in order to retain all students in the educational system in Rochdale itself. It was also stated that a

further cohort of young people at 18 move out of the area due to the shortage of higher education provision.

One of the biggest issues was felt to be the low aspirations of the community. It was also felt that if the Kingsway Development does take off, there will be a big challenge to up skill local people to take advantages of the opportunities it will offer. It was stated that the area has a cycle of low skill/low pay locally, which is hard to break into. It was felt that there are huge basic skills needs in the community and this makes attracting employer investment difficult. It was also felt that there is also a need to offer more training in the workplace, and more basic skills screening as part of this work. At present only 28% of the labour force is drawn from the local area because local people do not have the skills needed and it was felt that the local education and training systems could not fulfil the training needs in a short timeframe. There was also a feeling that the students' personal skills could be developed to be in line with employers' expectations, for example, presentation and time keeping.

It was also felt that the Learning Partnership needs to present a clearer picture of its strategic vision, and improve its communication with all providers within the area.

It was stated that Rochdale has some key areas of deprivation where more could be done to encourage people into learning and training, these include central Rochdale, Bellfield, Kirk Holt and the Asian Community within Wardleworth.

Provision

Overall most interviewees felt that academic provision in the Borough was especially well catered for with a wide range of subjects on offer. However some interviewees highlighted that vocational and occupational programmes are considered to be less readily available with access a particular issue, especially pre qualification training and E2E.

It was also felt that there are gaps, particularly across the spectrum of construction provision with too few places available for local learners, particularly at entry level. The main local provider, Hopwood Hall College (Rochdale) is over-subscribed for its construction and motor-vehicle provision. It was felt that there are also problems in finding places for young people wanting to study qualifications in childcare with a regularly occurring problem of finding nursery providers who will offer staff the opportunity to train during the day. A shortage of plumbing provision in the area was highlighted as Hopwood Hall College do not offer this area as either as a course or a Modern Apprenticeship. It was explained that Oldham College does offer both Modern Apprenticeships and a course in this vocational area, but will not take referrals from potential learners in Rochdale.

Some interviewees felt that there is a particular need for part-time evening provision for adults and that the 50+ age range are not adequately catered for within the current system.

It was reported that there has been a common approach to post-16 students by the schools and the College, for example, a common application form and prospectus. Also there has been some common timetabling so that different sixth forms can offer specific subjects with there being some mobility between partners. It was felt that this has had some success.

Some interviewees commented on students within the area having difficulties with Key Skills and this particularly showed itself in their numeracy abilities, which are important in engineering, and in their report writing skills, with them stating that even students at level 3 having poor Key Skills.

Partnerships

Overall it was felt that effective collaboration was already in evidence. We were informed that schools and colleges had collaborated at Key Stage 4 to provide, in some cases, common timetables, so that pupils could be moved around for the delivery of programmes. Inter school co-operation is enhanced by the regular meeting of head teachers who are able to take a more strategic view of the education provision as a consequence. Collaboration between the college and employers was considered to be quite strong and improving, however links between employers and schools with sixth forms was felt to be still in need of improvement, if students in these institutions are to benefit from a vocational focus to their studies.

It was felt that there are a number of small initiatives being implemented locally, for instance the "Compact" in Rochdale aiming to obtain work experience for Students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities.

It was stated that there was good cross-agency partnership working with an 'Inclusion' group formed bringing together the Connexions service, 14-19 providers, Youth Offending Teams, youth workers and social workers, to look at post 16 provision for their clientele. It was stated that there is also good work being carried out in the area in relation to family learning days involving local colleges, schools, adult and community learning providers and the local arts and heritage centre (which attracts ethnic minority learners who would not necessarily visit an educational establishment like a college).

We were also informed that the skills and work sub-group of the Rochdale Learning partnership looks at new employment opportunities coming up and how best to skill local people to take advantage of those opportunities.

The 14-19 Agenda

It was considered that progress was being made in the borough towards the 14-19 agenda and that the Tomlinson Report would be influential in progressing this agenda. It was felt that the schools, college and private training providers (PTP) are all on board and pupils from schools go to college or a PTP or both for half a day or a whole day a week to gain vocational skills and understand the world of work. Some college staff go into the schools to deliver specialist vocational provision and some pupils go on extended work placement, spending some of their time in college and some with a PTP.

However, it was felt that there are a number of funding streams which makes things unnecessarily complicated with the schools not wishing to fund this provision themselves.

The Rochdale Borough Learning Partnership has worked to establish the flexible 14-19 curriculum locally. A 14-19 Development Worker has been appointed to support and developments to date. Arrangements are negotiated between schools, colleges and private training providers. It was reported that the Learning Partnership intend to produce a composite Self-Assessment Report that reflects the quality development activities taking part across the partner organisations.

It was felt that there may be a possible problem of capacity, in that provision for 14-16 learners may "squeeze out" provision for 16-18 year olds in the same vocational areas/subjects. One effect of this is that, from some providers, there have been fewer places available for Year 11 school leavers than in previous years.

Connexions and Careers Advice

Overall the work carried out by the Connexions service was considered to be good, providing an especially valuable service to the hard to reach young people and those with multiple problems and disadvantages, or those who had experienced difficulties in moving on. It was stated that the performance indicators also suggest that the service is performing well as evidenced by the low number of NEET's and "not known" in the borough. There were positive comments made about how well the Connexions service tracked young people in the borough.

It was the perception that the Connexions Service was very focused on the NEET group and that as a result, it was not a universal service. This is a national issue related to the targets of the Connexions Service . The Connexions advisors were felt to be good, particularly in their targeting of specific pupils.

Information, Advice and Guidance Services (IAG)

It was considered that within their resources the information, advice and guidance team did an effective job for post 19 learners within the borough. Most IAG advisers have been accredited to the matrix quality standard, however it was felt that there was still not enough advice available to potential learners. It was believed that this is partly a funding issue, with resources limiting the scope of the service that can be offered. Most guidance is aimed at learners in work (Workforce Development) however, because the service is largely ESF funded, there is less emphasis on advice and guidance for the unemployed.

In order to ensure that all learners post 19, particularly those with learning difficulties, are supported it was considered important that the services offered by IAG are enhanced and perhaps less target driven if they are to be effective, particularly for learners where there is a transition from the

Connexions Service or issues which link with Social Services. It was felt that a more holistic approach would be beneficial to a number of learners who are unclear about learning opportunities or who require considerable additional support.

It was also felt that the IAG service is “invisible” as a separate service when co-located with Connexions. This can be off-putting for potential adult learners who may not see the service as relevant to them, given the apparent focus on advice for young people and school leavers.

Employer Engagement

It was reported that there are not that many large employers in the Borough and that small to medium sized employers (SMEs) are very prevalent. Stakeholders perceived that it is more difficult to engage with SMEs as their needs tend to be diverse.

There are mixed views as to the extent to which local employers are engaged in the learning agenda in Rochdale. The perception is that some employers are engaged through the training provider’s network, through their work with FE colleges and through engagement with the adult and community learning service and local schools. We were informed that The Learning Partnership has a sub group relating to work based skills which involves employers and that the Partnership works closely with the North Manchester Chamber of Commerce. However, overall it is perceived that employers are not engaged in the planning or management of education and training and more could be done to bring them on board.

Many stakeholders mentioned new developments taking place at Kingsway. It is thought that these developments are likely to create new opportunities for post 16 learners in Rochdale. It was suggested that there should be an expectation that developers and new businesses need to commit to high quality vocational and occupational training and learning opportunities for local people, including the development of a number of apprenticeships and mentoring schemes. It was felt that this would have the benefits of improving the skills base in the area, and raising ambition and aspirations of the members of the community. Some stakeholders felt that, if necessary, this should be written into contracts of developers and new companies in order to achieve these desired outcomes.

A number of stakeholders mentioned that there are problems in finding places for young people wanting to study Apprenticeships. It was reported that some local employers have serious concerns about the rules and regulations which they must abide by when they take on young people, and about the level of support these young people need. It was felt that as many of the employers in the area are SMEs, they do not always have the capacity to take on these roles which leads to an increase in the numbers of young people taking full time vocational courses at various colleges rather than following a work based learning route which could be more appropriate for them.

Employer Issues

We were informed that large parts of the borough of Rochdale are at full employment even though stakeholders indicated that there is a low pay, low skill economy with a particular focus around warehousing and packaging. It was stated that key issues in the area are a lack of self-confidence and low aspirations amongst learners leading to low attainment.

There was a common view relating to young people's preparedness for the workplace, with employers feeling there was a lack of employability skills such as communication skills, team work and transferable skills. It was also felt that there is an urgent need to improve both basic and vocational skills. There is also perceived to be a shortage of apprenticeship opportunities for young people in the borough which it was felt needed to be addressed.

However, it was felt that many employers in Rochdale are not identifying longer term skills needs and gaps, such as insufficient higher level skills at levels 3 and 4. It was stated that the Borough wants to attract employers who need higher level skills particularly in the light of the Kingsway Business Park Development. This development is expected to create 8,000 high skilled, high technology jobs and stakeholders believe that it will radically change the employer base in the area and lead to demand for new skills. Most stakeholders believe that the borough has a commitment to ensuring that local people are trained and prepared for local jobs.

Some stakeholders also believe that housing renewal and schools rebuilding programmes will bring pressure on the construction industry. We were informed that there are already shortages of skilled people in the area in terms of construction trades and therefore considerable investment in occupational and vocational construction skills training will be required in order to prepare Rochdale people to compete in this job market. It was felt that work based training providers, and an increase in Apprenticeships will have a significant contribution to make in ensuring a supply of skilled construction workers to meet employer demand.

Another issue that was raised by stakeholders is the perception that education and training providers are all targeting the same employers and that this leads to overload and confusion. It was felt that knowing what is available in terms of training and skills is problematic for employers and that there needs to be a simple guide that sign posts all training opportunities and this needs to be kept up to date.

Widening Participation

It was felt that there is a great deal of collaboration between providers, the community and the voluntary sector to widen participation, with Hopwood Hall College being a key player in increasing the numbers of students progressing post 16, and attracting learners who would not normally engage with education provision. It was felt that the response to the needs of learners in

the borough is now more robust in terms of the appropriateness of the curriculum offer and that widening participation was a strong agenda item. However, we were informed that there was still a need to offer basic skills provision in its discrete form, and also as an embedded provision within vocational programmes.

With regard to young people, we were informed that schools with sixth forms have continued to “vocationalise parts” of their curriculum offer which in turn becomes attractive to a wider range of learners. The number of work based training providers in Rochdale was also thought to have a positive effect in widening participation. Providers such as: Rochdale Borough Training Services who work closely with the Youth Offending Team in helping socially excluded learners and those young people who are difficult to place; Rochdale Training Association (EEF); Rathbone Training and Rochdale Connection Trust. The main concern expressed in this area was the cut back in E2E provision which was seen as an issue for the borough. It was felt that the Education Maintenance Allowance will have a positive impact on not only progression, but also on staying on rates and perhaps achievement.

In terms of adult learners, it is thought that providers are working together to consider how and where provision is best delivered. Examples included working with the local voluntary and community sector to promote the idea of learning, and working with the BBC to develop local projects to widen participation in community centres, and on the BBC bus. The Learning Partnership was also reported to be piloting “testbed learning in the community”, looking at new ways of delivering learning. We were also informed that the local college supports 40 non-campus based delivery points including some IT centres and that the College and the Adult Education Service deliver provision via these delivery points in the community.

Stakeholders believe that progress is being made towards attracting the non traditional learner and improving participation, however it was felt that a sizeable minority ethnic population are still not participating as fully as they might, and strategies are required to address this particular issue. It was also felt that providers are going into areas of deprivation but it is questionable whether these initiatives will be sustainable after special funding has ceased, and there is a need to identify mechanisms in local funding to make them more commercial and therefore sustainable.

One stakeholder indicated that a particular difficulty is learner travel and transport in the Rochdale area, and significantly in Heywood, which needs to be resolved if participation is to be widened in the borough. It was suggested that community transport and satellite education centre provision, in addition to a range of learning opportunities which are appropriate and meaningful to the learner, is essential.

In other areas of participation, widening participation in Rochdale was given as the main aim of the Aimhigher initiative which involves all providers and is steered by a management group. It is felt that awareness of going on to

university is high in the area and an embryonic project 'HERO' (Higher Education in Rochdale and Oldham) has been launched to provide greater higher education provision as it is felt there are not enough students going on to further and higher education.

Adult and Community Learning

We were informed that first rung training, such as Return to Learn and social learning is readily accessible in Rochdale. However, stakeholders felt there may be issues regarding the communication of the availability and accessibility of this provision. It was stated that through the Neighbourhood Renewal action plans a very strong message had been received that communities want local learning opportunities. However, there is a view that it will not be practical to provide higher level skill training at a local level due to resource implications.

It is believed that there is a strong focus on adult and community provision in terms of learning opportunities for a range of age groups, with adult and community programmes, being staffed in local schools offering examinable and non examinable courses. The LEA is perceived to be playing an important role in this type of provision, with community outreach centres run by Hopwood Hall College making a significant contribution to the adult and community programmes also having the effect of widening participation. It was felt that the local schools are willing to engage in family learning with this provision becoming increasingly effective and growing to meet demand.

It was reported that the Learning Partnership has tried to reach socially excluded groups and that these groups are a high priority, given the nature of the Borough. However, it was reported that there are still problems in getting learners to access learning opportunities even when they are available "on their doorstep". It was felt that there are some good examples of attempts to make learning more accessible in satellite centres across the borough, although funding has been restricted for level 2 programmes for adults which is not seen as helpful. We were informed that the 50+ age group tends to be overlooked in terms of education provision in Rochdale. There are also some key areas of deprivation where it is felt more needs to be done including central Rochdale, Bellfield and Kirk Holt and the Asian Community in Wardleworth.

Future Development

It was considered important to raise aspirations, ambition, and skills levels in Rochdale. It was felt that reduction in unemployment and the engagement of disaffected young people in the learning process is essential, and was felt that this will require co-ordinated and meaningful training opportunities which lead to job and career prospects in the locality. Stakeholders felt that the integration of the University sector into the area will present increased

opportunities for progression post 19 and offer life long learning to members of the community who wish to work, live and study in the Rochdale borough.

It was felt that there is likely to be an increased need for higher level skills, particularly in the areas of information technology and that educational providers had the scope and capacity to respond to that need. It was also felt that work based training had a capacity to expand and make a significant contribution to the vocational and occupational training requirements of the learner and the employer. It was also considered likely that skills for life requirements would remain on the agenda in the foreseeable future.

It was stated that as Rochdale is a small borough, it was felt that the demand for specific jobs, or those using generic skills was not going to grow significantly. It was felt that the Kingsway development would provide some opportunities and a number of stakeholders suggested that if appropriate employers are attracted to the development they will require high level skills which will bring challenges to the education and training providers in the borough. In addition to this it is believed that it will create an impetus to develop a higher education campus in the area to take learners onto the higher level programmes which will ultimately be required. The extension of the Metro link is also thought likely to enhance employment opportunities with associated learning and training needs and uplift in the skills base.

With regard to pre 16 education, it was suggested that schools need to value vocational training more and begin preparing pupils for work early in their school careers. It was considered that school pupils should be encouraged to be self directed and to accept that they are engaged in learning even when they are doing practical tasks.

It was considered important to address the skills gap which exists in the area and that staying on rates, retention and achievement need constant monitoring in order to identify key factors and maintain recent improvements in performance.

Other Issues

A number of additional issues were raised by stakeholders for consideration as part of the Strategic Area Review process including:

- The view that there is a plethora of different education and training initiatives, funded by different sources, which do not always allow a clear passage through for the learner;
- It was considered that there is a continuous round of strategic planning but insufficient action is being taken on the findings;
- It was suggested that the role of LSC is not clear - is it a strategic body that looks at employer needs and tries to accommodate them or is it a

funding body? Stakeholders also felt that the LSC should not be Manchester centric and should listen to local communities;

- It was felt that in order to move forward it is important that there is more collaboration, co-operation and transparency in the work undertaken by providers of education and training as lack of trust between organisations is damaging; and
- The perception is that there are too many political aspects to the provision in the area leading to a tension between providing services and developing opportunities that meet actual need.
- It was considered that employers need support from Government at the highest levels to acknowledge the valuable contribution they make to education and training.